CHAPTER TEN

British Women Writers of Peninsular Fiction

Susan Valladares

Talavera, Fuentes de Oñoro, Albuera, Badajoz, San Sebastian, Saragossa, Vimeiro, La Coruña, Bussaco, Ciudad Rodrigo, Salamanca, and Vitoria: these were only some of the names rich in vowels and alveolar trills that, from 1807 to 1814, British soldiers – and the public more widely – were asked to assimilate into their vocabularies. In order to satisfy the widespread demand for information relating to the Peninsular War, British publishers inflated their catalogues with military treatises, travellers" narratives, and literary works promoted with an eye to topicality. Spain, and to a lesser extent Portugal, already enjoyed a strong fictive profile: Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* had long been available in a number of competing translations and Catholic Spain established as a popular setting for gothic poems, plays and novels, including, notably, Matthew Lewis's page-turner *The Monk* (1796). The war opened up these texts to revised interpretations and also created demand for a new literary category, the Peninsular War novel. Alexander Dallas was, for many years, considered its progenitor, through his authorship of *Felix Alvarez; or, Manners in Spain: Containing Descriptive Accounts of some of the most prominent events of the late Peninsular War, and authentic anecdotes illustrative of the Spanish character: interspersed with poetry, original and from the Spanish* (1818) (Esdaile *Women* 23). This chapter revises this assumption by drawing attention to the women writers whose wartime novels about Portugal and Spain predated *Felix Alvarez*.[i]

The four women writers examined in this chapter enjoyed varying degrees of novelistic experience. *The Forest of Comalva, A Novel; Containing Sketches of Portugal and Spain, and Part of France* (1809) represented Mary Hill's first attempt as a published novelist. By contrast, Susan Fraser, who wrote under the pseudonym "Honoria Scott", had published poetry – *Camilla de Florian, and other poems* (1809) – under the epithet "An Officer's Wife". The year 1810 not only saw the publication of her *Amatory Tales of Spain, France, Switzerland, and the Mediterranean: containing The Fair Andalusian, Rosolia of Palermo, and The Maltese Portrait* but at least two other novels. Anna Maria Porter already had a number of novels to her name, including the historical romance, *The Hungarian Brothers* (1807), when *Don Sebastian; Or, The House of Braganza* appeared in 1809. Finally, "Mrs Meeke", the most prolific of the novelists studied, was a stalwart of the Minerva Press by the time she wrote *The Spanish Campaign* (1815). These women's Peninsular fiction secured significant, if not necessarily dominant, commercial appeal, as indexed by contemporary advertisements, notices and reviews, and the novels" inclusion in subscription and circulating library catalogues extending into the early 1830s.[ii] This chapter investigates these women writers" experimentation with different sub-genres, including the gothic, historical romance and travel narratives, and questions to what extent their Peninsular fictions succeeded in employing stereotypically feminine themes – such as religion, the home and family – to explore masculine codes of war, politics and power.

A "*maiden* effort"

At a period when the eyes of all Europe are directed to that awful scene of heroic enterprize [*sic*] now displayed in Spain and Portugal; when the heart of every Briton is animated to

support the cause of oppressed nations; the most trivial incidents relating to that part of the Continent may be capable of exciting some degree of interest. (Hill 1: iv)

The Preface to Mary Hill's *The Forest of Comalva. A Novel; Containing Sketches of Portugal and Spain, and Part of France* hereby elaborates upon the topical geographical expanse promised by its subtitle. But, in so doing, it effectively primes readers for a Peninsular War novel that Hill, in fact, fails to deliver. In a biting critique of *Comalva* the *Satirist* for April 1809 wryly noted that "the main story, although rather confused in its progress is highly pleasing in its close". The joke here is the reviewer's implied impatience to reach the novel's final page, which finds support, interestingly, in disappointed calculations that the advertised "*Sketches of Portugal and Spain, and Part of France"* occupy 58 pages of the first volume and 31 of the second, "not quite one eighth of the work" (4: 402). Indeed, although Portugal, Spain and France are of literal and symbolic importance to the plot, *Comalva* is an epistolary courtship novel, whose only real claims to topicality depend upon a number of pointed references to Anglo-Irish politics and generalised denunciations of aristocratic corruption. Set in the 1790s, *Comalva* tells the story of Frederic Hamilton and Gertrude Moreton who, having encountered familial hostility to their proposed marriage, are only successfully reunited after a period of separation – and mutual misunderstandings – spanning four years. Since the Hamiltons' opposition to Gertrude derives, in large part, from her ambiguous social standing, Gertrude's attempt to discover her parents" true histories absorbs much of the plot, linking her fate to the re-telling of her father's chequered past. But if the plot of *Comalva* ignores the military actions and cross-cultural romances through which the Peninsular War novel would come to define itself, its opening pages, nevertheless, dutifully acknowledge this potential. In response to the signposting provided by the novel's subtitle and Preface, Hill begins with Frederic's account of a recent Continental Tour: "As I think, dear Sir, that in the

course of your travels on the Continent, you have not visited Spain, an account of that country may be interesting", he proposes to his friend, Delville (1: 39). Frederic relates his departure from Falmouth to Lisbon and, from there, to Spain, where his narrative of adventure takes off. Readers of *Comalva* during the later years of the Peninsular War would have had occasion to pause at Frederic's descriptions of Talavera and Badajoz – sites, which, after July 1809 and April 1812, respectively, would be associated with particularly bloody allied victories. Hill could not have known this at the time of writing, but her decision to focus on the fictive site of the Forest of Comalva nevertheless inscribes a certain timelessness to the action narrated, inviting early and later readers alike to locate the forest within a familiar gothic imaginary. "Five leagues in length and full of oak trees", the forest is "famous for robbers" (1: 54) and Frederic discovers therein "a rude kind of hermitage" recently visited by the servants in his party (1: 76). He reports how the men returned from their expedition horrified at having found the corpse "of a man not long dead" and zealously watched over by "an infernal demon" (1: 77). Propelled by "all powerful curiosity", Frederic and his fellow-traveller, Harvey, proceed to the hermitage, where they are introduced to Glenalcar, its owner:

Glenalcar"s appearance was of the most awful kind. – A long black robe enveloped him, and his hoary beard "descending swept his aged breast;" his stature was majestic, and under his scowling brow his eyes seemed to glisten with malignant ferocity. (1: 81–82)

Borrowing from Oliver Goldsmith's poem *The Deserted Village* (1770), the mysterious, almost sublime figure cut by Hill's Glenalcar prepares readers for the gothic horrors anticipated by the servants" account. But following an initially hostile reception, Glenalcar eventually explains how an ill-spent life has occasioned his seclusion from society. Frederic's

narration of his Spanish tour continues somewhat abruptly thereafter; but the importance of this first, curious encounter with Glenalcar is established at the end of the novel when Frederic (this time, on a second journey to the Continent that sees him reunited with Gertrude) is surprised to find himself in Glenalcar's castle. "Worn down with age, and yet more from inward misery of mind" (3: 197), Glenalcar here admits to his once passionate love for Gertrude's mother, Adeline, and the nefarious schemes he pursued in order to punish her for eloping with Gertrude's father. Glenalcar's rational explanations for his behaviour ultimately ensure that neither of Frederic's encounters with him fully satisfies the gothic conventions by which they are framed. Even Frederic's attempt to detail Gertrude's unexpected discovery of Glenalcar's secret room fails to deliver on this count: notwithstanding the "black hangings", "the dismal moan of some person in distress" and the eventual disclosure of a coffin, the belatedness of Frederic's narration (which occurs after Glenalcar's confession) punctures readerly suspense (3: 221–2). The gothic qualities of *Comalva*, essential for the validation of the Spanish setting at its opening, are therefore invoked but never wholly activated, with Spain itself giving way to other Continental locations, and no real attempt made to render the novel more topical to the Peninsular War. Following the Anglo-Spanish alliance of 1808, numerous authors – both new and well-established – made reference to the military campaign in Spain and Portugal as justification for bringing their works to press. The Preface to *Comalva* was, therefore, not unusual in this respect. The war also gave fresh impetus to many older works, such as the Countess d'Aulnoy"s *The Lady's Travels into Spain: or, A Genuine Relation of the Religion, Laws, Commerce, Customs, and Manners of that Country* (1692). When *The Lady's Travels* was re-printed in 1808, its new publishers, Thomas Cadell and William Davies, opportunistically underlined how the Peninsular War had occasioned fresh interest in d'Aulnoy's seventeenth-century text:

At a time when the eyes of all mankind are anxiously directed towards Spain, as the country from whence we hope, under Providence, that the deliverance of the continent of Europe, from the opprobrious tyranny of a Corsican usurper, may eventually arise; it can require no apology for presenting to the Public a new edition of a work, which treats of the Spanish people, sovereign, and nation, as they existed one hundred and thirty years ago. (i)

Comalva's Preface couches Hill"s novel in almost exactly the same terms. But do *Comalva*"s title page and Preface amount, therefore, to a mere advertising stratagem, designed to cash in on the widespread demand for Iberian-themed fiction; or was there more at stake?

The publisher behind *Comalva* was Richard Phillips, an author in his own right, whose provincial career reached a dramatic climax in 1793, when he was arrested for selling Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man* (1791–2). Following his release, Phillips founded *The Monthly Magazine* in 1796 and oversaw a catalogue focused, primarily, on educative textbooks, but also a growing number of works of fiction, including Sydney Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl: A National Tale* (1806).[iii] Well known for his radical political views, Phillips attracted a circle of liberal-minded thinkers to his imprint, and it is important that *Comalva* be read within this context. It may go some way towards explaining why the Preface's reference to the war in Spain and Portugal ascribes to Hill's novel a topical appeal with which she refuses to directly engage. Phillips himself may have suggested a strategy of superficial topicality. Indeed, with Marseille functioning as a site for recovery and reconciliation, the novel's larger, professedly anti-French politics are open to qualification, throughout. This aspect of Hill's writing is likely to have helped convince Phillips to take a punt on an otherwise unexceptional novel, but it might also have justified his recourse to a politically-placating Preface. Competing against the likes of T. F. Hughes and the Minerva Press for a

share in the market for contemporary fiction, Phillips would have been fully aware of his rivals" aggressive strategy of advertising suggestive titles and directed prefatory remarks (Garside). In an ever more imitative and fiercely competitive marketplace, the Preface's formulaic introduction to the "awful scene of heroic enterprize now displayed in Spain and Portugal" helped Phillips pass Hill's politically pointed, if altogether underwhelming, novel as one that openly supported the government's latest military campaign.

"Mrs Meeke"

Hill's "*maiden* effort", as the *Satirist* (4: 408) deridingly called it, would be followed, a decade later, by another novel, *Anselmo; or, The Day of Trial. A Romance* (1820), published, this time, by the Minerva Press. From the 1770s to the 1810s, the Minerva Press was, as Dorothy Blakey succinctly puts it, "the chief purveyor of the circulating-library novel" (1). "Mrs Meeke" was one of the Press's most prolific authors, with an estimated output of 26 novels between 1795 and 1823, in addition to children's books and several translations from German and French. For many years, "Mrs Meeke" was thought to be Mary Meeke, the wife of a Staffordshire clergyman, Rev. Francis Meeke (Blakey 60; Magnani; Page "Meeke"). Recent scholarship by Simon MacDonald has persuasively argued, however, that this loyal contributor to the Minerva Press, who also published under the pseudonym of "Gabrielle", was, in fact, Elizabeth Meeke (née Allen), a stepsister of Frances Burney. Meeke, while benefitting, to an extent, from the literary connections facilitated by her family, was, by MacDonald"s account, a marginal figure, whose scandalous love-life increased her distance from her stepsister and "more genteel Burney relations" – a distance only further augmented by "her decision to take up writing avowedly commercially-minded novels" (368, 385).

When *The Spanish Campaign* was published in 1815, the Napoleonic Wars had come to an end, rendering the immediacy that defined Hill's Preface a thing of the past. Why, then, might such a prolific writer have turned to Peninsular politics at this late date; and what limitations, as well as opportunities, did this afford? Family feuds are at the heart of *The Spanish Campaign* which focuses on the Franklin family"s financial self-making and undermining through underhanded strategies. Charles Sr (cheated from his rightful inheritance by his elder brother, George) establishes a successful career for himself as a solicitor of dubious methods. In his search for an heir, he settles upon his nephew, the young Charles (George's third son), but their relationship collapses when the younger Charles is accused of fathering a bastard son. Turned out by his uncle, Charles encounters an old friend from Eton, serving as an officer in the English army. Their meeting proves pivotal in transforming what had been a family drama into a wartime romance. Expressing his ardent wish to join his "brave countrymen in the Peninsula, as a volunteer" (1: 103) Charles is introduced to Colonel Davers, whom he discovers to be a distant relative. But if Charles is effectively destitute when he makes the decision to join the British army, his patriotism appears to be genuinely felt. His interest in active service is of long-standing, and his commitment to helping others already established by his heroic rescue of an uncle for whom he did not much care. Meeke underlines that Charles's motivations are pure, and that ideals such as his should matter. Although Charles is continually referred to as a quixotic character (2: 187) – and disparagingly so by his uncle – readers are informed of Davers's belief that "young men should be military Quixotes" (1: 104). In this vein, Charles's quixotism proves redemptive, defining him against the grain of a cold, profit-driven world that earns his uncle nicknames such as "the Jew" and "cent per cent" (3: 46), which appear with equal frequency in the novel.

In Spain, Charles soon acquires the reputation of being "a sort of military phenomenon" but, interestingly, Meeke's narrator resists detailing his skirmishes too closely, claiming, instead, that "the mere military details of a campaign may, and daily do afford proofs of valour and heroism, but might not prove entertaining to our readers" (1: 160). Meeke's apparent disavowal of the classification of a "Peninsular War novel" is, however, only skin-deep. When Charles is eventually captured by the French and made prisoner at the castle of the Duke D"Aranza, Meeke applies the gothic qualities that characterised Hill's Spanish imaginary to decidedly political ends. The novel's readers learn that the French soldiers, newly in possession of the castle, are eager to exploit its treasures and, most urgently of all, find the Duke's daughter, Donna Victoria, (his heiress, who is presumed to have taken refuge somewhere in or nearby the castle). In these circumstances, Charles develops a friendship with the French Captain, Beaumanoir, who relates Victoria's family history and admits to the ardent desire for her that consumes the French general, De Roncenvalles. Victoria, who has indeed been hiding in the secret recesses of the castle, succeeds in establishing a private communication with Charles, whom she helps escape, and who re-appears with a band of soldiers to rescue her from an agreed hiding place in the forest. The British soldiers, led back to the castle by Victoria, then take advantage of its labyrinthine passageways in order to re-gain control from within. Their success, which, significantly, in this instance, depends upon Victoria's assistance, helps redefine the Anglo-Spanish alliance – which, by 1815 had received heated criticism – as a tempered and productive kind of quixotism, to be celebrated rather than condemned. Meeke's novel, like the Spanish-themed plays performed in the commercial theatres during the Peninsular War, insists that readers explore beyond surface meanings (Valladares *Staging*).

In Meeke's readily-accessible wartime allegory, the characters" national and ethnic backgrounds thus offer much more than merely localised detailing. When Charles and

Victoria are eventually married, Charles discovers that his new wife's wealth is far more extensive than he had imagined, thanks to the enterprise of her Jewish grandfather, who removed to London in order to evade religious persecution in Spain. Charles agrees to keep this family secret, and is given leave by Davers to escort Victoria to the relative safety of Lisbon. But as they approach the Portuguese capital, Victoria is killed in a freak carriage accident. Having already escaped war-torn Spain and a later attempt on her life by hired assassins, Victoria's death is made all the more tragic by its suddenness. Meeke thus concludes the novel's cross-cultural romance with unexpected – and arguably unnecessary – violence. Victoria's death nevertheless leaves Charles sole heir of a tremendous fortune, and free to act as his own agent upon his return to England, where he attempts to heal his divided family, and succeeds in regaining his uncle's favour. In England, he is also introduced to Lady Susan Delaney, whom his uncle had arranged for him to marry as a form of repayment for her brother's debts. Charles and Lady Susan marry by the novel's conclusion, but only after he has extended financial gifts, rather than demands. This justifies the narrator's final, emphatic assertion that "of all vices, avarice is one of the most abhorred by all benevolent minds" (3: 244). By distinguishing Charles's righteous ambitions from his father's, uncle's and brothers" avaricious motivations, the plot of *The Spanish Campaign* works tirelessly to locate true value in a world of fluctuating economic, moral, and political credit.

With military details skirted over, when Charles's career in the army comes to an end, Meeke's narrator casually asserts: "As we do not pretend to detail battles, or even skirmishes, since victory, it is well known, generally rests with the British, suffice it to say, that the general's plan fully succeeded" (2: 154). The decision to publish *The Spanish Campaign* at the end of the war enabled Meeke to take short-cuts such as this, which helped keep her pen closer to lived experience, and spared readers from too painful a revisiting of the real "battles" and "skirmishes" fought abroad by their male family members and friends. Meeke

does not, however, shy away from the larger political questions raised during the Peninsular War. Charles's marriage to Victoria effectively doubles as a re-imagining of the Anglo-Spanish alliance along private, rather than public, lines. As such, when, at the time of her rescue from the castle, Victoria offers to reward the British soldiers who have helped her remove the family treasures to safety, Charles readily asserts: "We come as friends, to assist in removing your goods, not as plunderers and extortioners, to take advantage of your misfortune" (2: 22–23). This is confirmed by General Lord --- [Wellington], who also underlines to Victoria that his army "entered this country to protect and assist, not to plunder the Spaniards" (2: 59). Meeke's readers would have been fully aware that the dehumanizing effects of a brutal and prolonged war had, in fact, resulted in atrocious behaviour by British soldiers, accused of pillage, rape and murder (Fraser 230; Parker 42–59). Whether convincingly or not, Meeke uses her characters as mouthpieces for decrying against these reports, and thereby addressing a dimension of the Peninsular campaign that many commentators refused to tackle head on. Meeke does not, then, like Dallas in *Felix Alvarez*, engage with the military techniques employed in specific battles, but she openly explores the prejudices that persisted on both sides of the Anglo-Spanish alliance.

"An Officer"s Wife"

When, in *The Spanish Campaign*, Charles enquires of Beaumanoir if the French general intends to marry Donna Victoria, the Captain replies: "A wife is a serious encumbrance to a soldier. My dear fellow, we are not indulgent to our men in that respect as you are: you know no women follow our army; and a superior officer must not break through the established rule" (1: 174). The British army's female camp followers faced, however, a much more uncertain fate than Beaumanoir's disingenuous answer suggests. As F.C.G Page and, more

recently, Charles Esdaile have documented, the number of wives permitted to accompany a British regiment on active service was limited to an average of 5 for every 100 men (Page *Drum* 17; Esdaile *Women* 74). The wives were chosen by lot: those selected faced an uncomfortable journey of three weeks by sea to Portugal, living in tightly packed quarters, with only half rations for sustenance; while those who remained were given a cash allowance to assist their return home, but no further aid (Page *Drum* 22). The diary of Catherine Exley, who followed her husband, Joshua Exley, to the Iberian Peninsula attests to the hardships she experienced as the wife of a corporal in the 34th Regiment: her entries are punctuated with recurrent references to extreme weather conditions, dirt, illness, violence, pain, and gruesome deaths (Exley).

Unlike Exley, most women writers of Peninsular fiction were, by their own admission, never more than armchair travellers to the Iberian Peninsula. Susan Fraser, who wrote her fiction under the pseudonym of "Honoria Scott", may have been an exception, however. As the author of *Amatory Tales, The Winter in Edinburgh* (1810), *The Vale of Clyde* (1810), and, a few years later, *Strathmay* (1813), Fraser is identified in *The Biographical Dictionary of Living Authors of Great Britain and Ireland* (1816) as the wife of an officer from the 42nd division, whose *Camilla de Florian and other poems* is listed as her best known publication. This collection of poems, "published in the hope that their profits may administer to the comforts of a sick husband", defines Fraser as an indirect victim of the Napoleonic wars, venturing into the public world of print in order to provide for her family's financial security (*Monthly Review* 1809: 432) The *Monthly Review* (1809: 433) reserved qualified praise for the work, and noted, significantly, that "[Fraser] has been happy in several of her imitations of the Spanish", which suggests a good working knowledge of the language. For its part, the *Satirist*, previously strident in its critique of Hill's *Comalva,* found much to celebrate in Fraser's *Amatory Tales*; not least "the minuteness of the detail" that

characterizes the landscape descriptions in "The Fair Andalusian" (*Satirist* 7: 478). Quoting several passages descriptive of Gibraltar, the *Satirist* concluded that the novel's author must have sketched "from actual observation" (7: 478). But no convincing evidence is advanced beyond this speculative claim, which must consequently remain somewhere between the possible and probable.[iv]

In contrast to women like Exley, the wives of British officers and generals who travelled to the Peninsula tended to reside in "the relative safety" of cities such as Madrid or Lisbon (Esdaile *Women* 89). Whether Fraser had really travelled to Gibraltar, or acquired her knowledge through careful study of contemporary travellers' accounts, newspaper reports and (most likely) her husband's letters, "The Fair Andalusian" speaks to an acutely personal interest in the Peninsular campaign. Fraser's narrative begins in Gibraltar, where a young English Captain, Montolieu, strikes a friendship with the Swiss Chevalier du Marr and commits himself to the cause of Spanish patriotism. He becomes, however, bitterly disillusioned with the course of Spanish politics and after a period of service under the Marquis of la Romana's army, returns to Gibraltar and, finally, England. His cross-cultural experiences continue, however, in the form of his marriage to Estella Mondecar, the beautiful daughter of a Spanish marquis, whom he first meets in Gibraltar.

Many female readers seem to have been curious to learn more about the manners and appearance of Spanish women whom the war had rendered their potential rivals in love. In *The Spanish Campaign*, Meeke pushes this curiosity to the extreme when, in their discussion of the local women, Beaumanoir and Charles broach the subject of sexual appetites: "Beaumanoir wished to persuade our hero that he had not found them prudes" (1: 183). Adopting Montolieu"s perspective, Fraser introduces Estella with a lover's appreciation for sensuality:

> Her face, a fine oval, characterised by dignity and beauty, its white rose tint clear to paleness; long silken fringes softening the scintillations of large black eyes, full of melting expressions sparkling in clear and brilliant beauty through the half drawn veil, magic ornament of Spanish attraction; a redezilla of black floss silk confined her tresses; the beauty of her hands were displayed by the sable velvet of her vest. Montolieu gazed on them with admiration. (1: 90)

At the ball that follows, Estella is shown off to even greater advantage: wearing a vest "tight to her delicate waist" (1: 106), she dances with castanets, ("language to the eye and lip"; 1: 110), then performs boleros ("which displayed the beauty of her fine form to its utmost advantage"; 1: 110) and, finally, the "snake-like" guaracha (which obviously arouses Montolieu; 1: 111). All three dances were, by 1810, popular on the London stages; with the actress Rosemond Mountain's dynamic renditions of "The Sprightly Castanets" prominently advertised in the playbills for Drury Lane Theatre (Valladares *Staging* 299).

Fraser's Spanish women are, however, more than the sum of their physical parts. Readers are informed that the Countess B—, also known as "the ministering angel of Saragossa" (2:16), is among Estella"s cousins:

> She had trod unhurt the path of charity, through the destructive fires of war, the death-dealing artillery, and sinking edifices of Saragossa; supporting in the arms of beauty her wounded countrymen, and leading her little band of females over the bodies of the dead, to the succour of the dying. (2: 21–22)

By 1810, Fraser's readers would immediately have recognised Estella's cousin as María Consolación Azlor, the historical Countess (or, Condesa de) Bureta, who had put her

possessions in the service of Saragossa's resistance fighters, and personally assisted with the provision of food, medical supplies, and even the evacuation of the General Hospital – acts which caused her name to acquire a "proverbial" resonance (Saglia *Poetic* 192). As Diego Saglia explains, the kind of heroism associated with Spanish women "was intriguing because it teased the conventionally domestic site of womanhood":

> The boundaries of her existence, the hearth and marriage, are not forgotten, but re-positioned within situations that necessarily challenge usual domestic values. This irregularity, akin to that of guerrilla warfare, proved very attractive for British readers, and Spanish women became essential figures in fictional texts about Spain during the Peninsular War. (*Poetic* 192)

Interestingly, both Meeke and Fraser responded conservatively to the opportunities for gendered action opened up by the war. In *The Spanish Campaign*, Victoria's acts of defiance require Charles's support and are ultimately short-lived; while Fraser's celebration of the Countess of Bureta remains confined to her charitable actions. Thus, when Estella cross-dresses as a young soldier in order to follow Montolieu into battle, Fraser works hard to downplay the potential radicalism of her gesture, making it clear, in the final chapter, that it was for Montolieu whom Estella has endured "the perils of war, the disguises of person, and the united sufferings of want, danger, and disease" (2: 125). Driven by desire alone, Estella shows "fortitude and enterprise for deeds of chivalric love" that ultimately liken her more to the day-dreaming, romantic Clara, than the latter's older sister, the "ministering angel of Saragossa", whose "actions of active virtue" were bold but consistent with her femininity (2: 24–5).

An historical romance

From the outset, "The Fair Andalusian" speaks to the French Revolution, as much as the Peninsular War – a quality that aligns the novel with other contemporary wartime texts, such as William Wordsworth's long prose pamphlet, *Concerning the Relations of Great Britain, Spain, and Portugal to each other, and to the common enemy; at this crisis, and specifically as affected by the Convention of Cintra* (1809) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Letters on the Spaniards* (1809–1810). Although Fraser's approach is less philosophical, her early privileging of the stories of the Chevalier du Marr helps prepare readers for the *Amatory Tale*'s investment in the themes of heroic agency, loyalty, and political enthusiasm and its corruption, which were as applicable to the French Revolution as to the British military campaign in Spain and Portugal. "The Fair Andalusian" thus opens with Du Marr, in confidence, telling Montolieu how the leader of the Swiss regiment, Valmont, was betrayed by a villainous Frenchman named Fayau – a personal tragedy that embodies the ideological corruption associated with the aftermath of 1789, and identifies the dangers to be avoided at all costs by the proponents of revolution in Spain and Portugal. For Fraser, the Peninsular War required – arguably, demanded – an understanding of the revolutionary wars that preceded it. This attempt to establish a perspective informed by recent history is also implicit in Hill's *Comalva*, published in 1809 but set in the 1790s, and is present, to at least some extent, in Meeke's repeated deferrals to readers" prior knowledge of the battles only vaguely described in *The Spanish Campaign*. But in 1809, Ana Maria Porter boldly ascribed to *Don Sebastian* the status of an "historical romance".

Don Sebastian opens with an Introduction which emphatically asserts that "NEVER has the pen of history had to record a more affecting event, that that which bore the house of Braganza to another hemisphere" (xi). This is followed by an elaborate description of how,

on 29 November 1807, as the Portuguese royal family left the shores of Lisbon for Brazil, the Prince Regent attempted to lift morale by reading, from a manuscript, the history of his ancestor, Don Sebastian. Porter thus establishes a clear link between the plights of the historic and contemporary Braganzas alluded to by the novel's subtitle. She received, however, mixed criticism from the reviewer for the *Critical Review*, who applauded the "arrangement of circumstance, and the discrimination of character" evinced in *Don Sebastian*, but was altogether dismissive of its author's claims to historicity. It is only after "discarding all ideas of historical resemblance, and considering the work merely as a fiction" that the reviewer concedes that Porter's depth of characterization entitles her to "rank among the best of our living novelists" (18: 356). Porter's Introduction, in particular, provokes notable anxiety:

> It is impossible not to lament that the poor Prince Regent, in addition to all his other woes, should have been burthened with so unconscionable a roll of paper as the four volumes of *Don Sebastian*; and though we by no means insinuate that his burthen was less precious than that of the pious Aeneas (to which it is compared) we could wish at least that Miss Porter had allowed him to carry it in a more convenient as well as roomy receptacle than the inside of his waistcoat. We have some doubt too, whether it is quite fair, while a man in still living, (though in the new world) to invent so dull and unnecessary a speech for him as that here assigned to the Prince. (18: 363)

Here, sarcastic humour belies the concern that "Miss Porter" should have imagined such a daring combination of history and romance. By mocking Porter's comparison of the Prince to Virgil's Aeneas, the reviewer calls into question the appropriateness of the classical allusion, and concludes, finally, with the unforgiving observation that Porter, "in line with other

female writers", too often "mistak[es] affection for sentiment, and inflation for elegance or sublimity" (18: 363).

Porter"s first readers would, most likely, already know of Don Sebastian's story (through, for example, John Dryden's successful play of that name, first performed in 1689). Porter's novel takes his biography further, however, by imagining Sebastian's fate in the aftermath of the Portuguese army's disastrous defeat at the Battle of Alcazar, wherein he was presumed to have died. Readers are introduced, instead, to a Portuguese king who is rescued, in the final hour, from death in battle but becomes a political exile, and is several times captured and enslaved by the Ottomans. In this circumstance, Sebastian meets Kara Aziek, the beautiful and benevolent daughter of El Hader, with whose assistance he returns to Portugal, incognito. There, Sebastian discovers that "the court, the army, and the people, were steeled against him", and that even his lover, Donna Gonsalva, has been unfaithful (2: 150). The tying together of public and private lives is significant here. Sebastian's foolhardy decision to launch a Crusade was determined, after all, not only by his Catholic zeal, but his urgent desire to secure a papal dispensation for his marriage to Gonsalva. Indeed, the young king's inability to distinguish between his monarchical and personal obligations results in a series of disappointments for which Sebastian himself is largely to blame. Fiona Price thus diagnoses Sebastian's story as one of "Christian hubris": "it is only when he has learnt the lessons of true chivalric humanity that he is fit to rule" (*Reinventing* 141–2).

Although Porter's Sebastian survives the Battle of Alcazar, the disguises he must thereafter assume for his own safety effectively efface his historical identity. His resolution to travel to Brazil, where his friends Da Castro and Gaspar have kept his memory alive, begins to re-align the novel's plot with the frame narrative established by Porter's Introduction, but it never fully does so. Instead, romance takes over as Aziek, who has converted to Protestantism since her last encounter with Sebastian, succeeds in convincing the Portuguese

king to abandon his ardent Catholicism in favour of a more rational Anglican faith – a conversion charged with deep political, as well as personal, implications. In the Preface to *Don Sebastian* Porter explains that since Sebastian's "chief calamity was the product of a bigotted attachment to the doctrines of Rome", a change in his religion was necessary in order to effect the full reformation of his character (vii). The fact that Sebastian's conversion occurs at the instigation of his originally Muslim wife was deemed "rather extraordinary" by the *Critical Review* (18: 361); but for *Le Beau Monde* (2: 193) "the bright beams of religion's truths and confidence" represented a *coup de grâce* that rendered Sebastian "no longer the *hero* only" but "still greater" because "CHRISTIAN".

Porter's Preface also clearly anticipates the Brazilian section of *Don Sebastian* by drawing its readers" attention to the full extent of the author's historical research. Here, Porter begins to reconcile the otherwise conflicting imperatives of history and romance by explaining her aim to "keep as close to historical records, as was consistent with a work wherein imagination is allowed to make up for the deficiencies of actual tradition" (iv). The description of the Guaymures – a ferocious, cannibalistic tribe that existed in a permanent state of war – provides a prime example of the possibilities permitted within this mixed genre, as anticipated by William Godwin in his essay, "Of History and Romance".

Porter's knowledge of the Guaymures would, most likely, have been acquired by reading the accounts of the Dutch traveller, Joannes de Laet.[v] Porter paints a grotesque picture:

> The Guaymures were cannibals: they devoured their prisoners taken in battle, and to their idol Marakha, occasionally sacrificed even their own infants. Armed with ponderous clubs and poisoned arrows, their naked bodies besmeared with the juices of noisome plants, and rendered hideous by strange punctures, their long black hair

> flying loose over their bodies, these tremendous savages would issue from the woods, yelling like beasts of prey, and falling on the plantations of the Europeans, would fire their sugar-mills, slaughter the inhabitants, and make horrid banquets upon their quivering limbs. (3: 217–218)

Sebastian's avowed intent to "humanize a savage race" by introducing the Guaymures to culture and religion, represents a remarkable ambition – but, also, a necessary one. As the narrator and Sebastian's own speeches mutually confirm, the Guaymures' savage behaviour has been learned. The victims of imperial bigotry, they are a "suspicious and cruel, because fearful and once ill-used people" (3: 222). Furthermore, as Sebastian himself frames it, he must try to "atone for the outrages of [his] ancestors, to that simple race whose land they moistened with blood" (3: 216). The Portuguese had a damning Black Legend of their own to contend with and, here, we see Porter acknowledge the global dimension of the Peninsular War by highlighting the need to secure retribution for past sins.

Significantly, then, it is not until Sebastian has the "gratification of beholding a people tamed by kindness, and rapidly proceeding in the path of improvement" that the action relocates to Europe. While the birth of his daughter, Blanche, encourages Sebastian to revisit his royal birthright, and enter into alliances with a number of foreign powers, his refusal to revert to Catholicism results in his imprisonment in Venice. Although he is eventually released, the throne of Portugal remains elusive to him until his return to Portugal, thirty years after Aziek's death, as dramatized in the novel's Coda. That Aziek remained, throughout, a faithful companion to Sebastian, is crucial to the politicized sentimentalism that defines her place within the novel. She is, in many ways, the novel's most heroic figure, whose actions are free of prejudice, bold and dignified. It is significant then, that in the Coda, Porter focuses on Sebastian's encounter with his granddaughter, another female figure whose

matrilineal descent makes her a surrogate for the kind of heroism associated with Aziek.

Porter's novel concludes, poignantly, with a new generation of Braganzas successfully reclaiming Portugal's independence from Spanish rule. Fulfilled by witnessing the restoration of his family to the throne, Sebastian dies shortly after their moment of triumph. This structure confirms *Don Sebastian* as a novel of perpetual wandering; a novel whose protagonist experiences exile both voluntarily and involuntarily, and whose final homecoming sees him restored to his throne, but only symbolically. By dramatizing Sebastian's varied experiences across three continents, Porter's ambitious geographical span and carefully studied historicism set her apart from the other novelists considered in this chapter. It is not surprising, then, that *Don Sebastian* has recently featured at the vanguard of revisionist efforts by, notably, Gary Kelly, Fiona Price, Ina Ferris and Devoney Looser, to recover the celebrity of Anna Maria and Jane Porter, and seriously assess the sisters" claims to having arrived at the historical novel before Walter Scott.

In the Coda to *Don Sebastian*, Porter ultimately resists the opportunity to explicitly re-integrate the historical and contemporary strands of her novel. Indeed, while the Peninsular War provided the starting point for all four novels discussed in this chapter, interestingly, none appear to have been content to consider the war itself as their point of arrival. Even Meeke and Fraser, whose plots unfold on the battlefields of contemporary Spain, take the earliest opportunity to retreat to British shores. Their reluctance may be at least partly explained by what appears to have been a shared ambivalence regarding the commercial appeal of Peninsular fiction – an appeal that went hand-in hand with a more general demand for Peninsular goods, ranging from newspaper articles on the war in Spain and Portugal to topical plays, songs, satirical prints and even elaborately decorated fans. The sheer plurality of Iberian-themed merchandise available seems to have fostered an acute sensitivity to the (often deeply) suspicious practices of wartime mediation at large, as can be instanced in the

attacks made by Hill and Meeke on the mis-information promulgated by contemporary newspapers.[vi] Private records of the period suggest that their concerns were widely and painfully felt. Writing in September 1811 to her uncle Frederick Reid –William Cobbett's brother-in-law, who was stationed with the Royal Artillery Drivers in Portugal and suffering from ill-health – Anne Cobbett, makes the pointed observation:

> The newspapers here are full of letters from English Officers in Spain and Portugal stating the British Army to be in perfect health, and spirits, and always (for this is a thing never left out) anxiously expecting a battle to take place. If you ever have opportunities of seeing our newspapers, it must, I think, be very galling to you, to see your situation thus falsely represented. (Cobbett Papers, XXIX/52/1)

Anne Cobbett's awareness of the distance between reported and lived experiences goes some way towards explaining the circumspect treatment of the Peninsular War by the novelists examined in this chapter. From the inexperienced Hill, who exploited topicality in order to examine still tense Anglo-Irish relations, to Meeke, whose conservative plot celebrates the quixotism of its hero but refuses to fully romanticize Spain, women writers of Peninsular fiction called for seasoned yet inquisitive readers, willing and able to examine, interrogate and put to account the wartime romances they held in their hands.

Hill, Porter, Fraser and Meeke thus engaged with, rather than pandered to, a popular readership bent on topicality. Their novels were broad enough to allow for discussions of systems of government, religious conversion, cross-cultural romances, diplomacy, slavery and colonialism, as well as warfare. At the same time, the prefatory material that frames Hill's and Porter's novels provide explicit articulations of mutually-felt anxieties about the agency and authority of women writers operating within a carefully regulated and explicitly

politicized marketplace. The intricate, evolving relationship between these authors and their readers makes the Peninsular War novel important not only to those interested in Anglo-Iberian politics and culture, but to the history of the novel more generally. It sheds light, for instance, on Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley. A Tale*, published in 1849 but set in the years 1811–1812 – years marked by Luddite protests, agitation against the Orders in Council, widespread economic hardship, and of course, the continuance of the Peninsular War. Although Brontë's choice of an English setting means that *Shirley* comes short of constituting a Peninsular fiction, pointed references to the military campaign nevertheless occur at key points in the plot. Strikingly, the conclusion alludes to Spain when the narrator celebrates not only the protagonists" marriage but the heroism of the British soldiers led by Wellington: "the bells clash out again, not only through Yorkshire but through England: from Spain, the voice of a trumpet has sounded long: it now waxes louder and louder: it proclaims Salamanca won" (3: 315). In this typically unembarrassed imbrication of the public and private that marks female authorship, Brontë revisits the tense relationship between history and romance that had shaped the Peninsular fiction written by Hill, Porter, Fraser and Meeke three decades earlier.

Notes to Chapter Ten

[i] On women's writing, more generally, during the Peninsular War, see **Duarte.**

[ii] See entries for Hill, [Scott], Porter and Meeke in the *British Fiction Database, 1800–1829* (http://www.british-fiction.cf.ac.uk).

[iii] See the entry for "Phillips, Sir Richard" in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

[iv] In describing the excellence of Spanish women as dancers, Fraser notes, "the truth is, that tourists have few opportunities of witnessing the amusements of the higher classes". This *may* suggest that her knowledge was acquired first-hand (1: 108).

[v] On de Laet's descriptions of the Guaymures, see Mason 152.

[vi] In *Comalva*, the publication of a libelous paragraph results in the false belief that Frederic has married; while in *The Spanish Campaign*, Charles finds himself the subject of regular – and often wildly inaccurate – speculation by British journalists.